



high-impact afterschool for all

A Statewide Quality Framework

by Jennifer L. Siaca

The need for afterschool programs is clear: Research and practice demonstrate that quality afterschool programs keep youth safe; support working families; and provide critical learning, personal development, arts, and recreational opportunities. New York State alone uses nearly \$300 million in local, state, and federal funds for afterschool programs; it delivers public funds to organizations

using a wide array of program models that serve many different populations (New York State Afterschool Network [NYSAN], 2008). However, universal definition of “quality afterschool programs” has not always been evident. The diversity of the afterschool field allows young people to have valuable, varied experiences. Still, the field must articulate common elements that all programs should incorporate into their work in order to maximize positive outcomes for youth.

The critical importance of *quality* afterschool programs in supporting youth is well documented. As reported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human

Services (2006), high-quality afterschool programs can “have significant, positive effects” on youth, yet low-quality programs can “fail to show positive effects or even have negative impacts.” Additional studies on the importance of afterschool program quality have been conducted by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007), the Intercultural Center for Research in Education and National Institute on Out-of-School Time (Miller, 2005), and the Massachusetts Special Commission on After School and Out-of-School Time (Hall & Gruber, 2007).

In order to advance the afterschool field, the New York State Afterschool Network (NYSAN) developed a

THE CAT UP THE STREET
A scene from the community. Feeding and taking care of the cats in my community is something that I love to do.
OUR WORLD IN PICTURES

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ten-element framework for program quality that has been widely adopted throughout the state and across the country. The framework hinges on the recognition that program quality is the best lever to realize the positive student outcomes that programs seek. The elements and corresponding indicators of quality in NYSAN's framework provide a structure to promote continuous program improvement and professional development design for out-of-school time programs. The framework has had great impact on how programs provide services and on how government agencies, intermediaries, and technical assistance specialists view program quality.

This article follows NYSAN's journey from developing the first iteration of the framework through implementing complex strategies to promote quality throughout the state. It suggests ways in which this framework can be useful to afterschool practitioners, technical assistance professionals, intermediaries, and policymakers nationwide.

Program Quality: A Universal Framework

The program quality framework was developed over two years and published in 2005 by NYSAN, a public-private partnership and one of 39 statewide afterschool networks (National Network of Statewide Afterschool Networks, n.d.). NYSAN's Quality Assurance Committee, a group of statewide afterschool experts, developed the framework with input and feedback from a larger group of afterschool practitioners and national experts. Because NYSAN is a partnership of multiple stakeholders, the quality framework reflects the consensus of a wide range of partners, including state agencies, large intermediaries, and small community-based organizations. The framework transcends a program's model, geography, and host setting, yet provides a detailed structure for what high-quality programs should aim to achieve. The framework can be used by school- and community-based programs—licensed or legally exempt—whether they operate before school, after school, or during the summer.

NYSAN structured the framework around ten essential elements of program quality, each of which is defined by a list of specific quality indicators. The framework incorporates national and local standards and research, including the National AfterSchool

Association standards (National School-Age Care Alliance, 1998), with local work done across the country, such as frameworks developed in Baltimore (Baltimore Safe and Sound Campaign, 1999), Boston (Achieve Boston, 2003), and Los Angeles (Freeman & Redding, 1999).

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NYSAN partners considered factors unique to New York; they subsequently added concepts derived from the New York State School-Age Child Care regulations (NYS Office of Children and Family Services, 2005) and feedback from New York-based program providers. The resulting framework includes a full spectrum of criteria, including point-of-service, administrative, and management elements. Some of the indicators are observable, while others might be written

into policies or documented in program records. The ten essential elements of program quality are:

- Environment and climate
- Administration and organization
- Relationships
- Staffing and professional development
- Programming and activities
- Linkages between school and afterschool
- Youth participation and engagement
- Parent, family, and community partnerships
- Program growth and sustainability
- Measuring outcomes and evaluation

A recent meta-analysis of eight research studies and existing program quality frameworks (Palmer, Anderson, & Sabatelli, 2009) affirmed that the field is beginning to agree on what makes a high-quality program.

Six domains—supportive relationships, intentional programming, strong community partnerships, promotion of youth engagement, physical safety, and continuous program improvement—represent clear points of convergence across the various definitions of program quality. The field is reaching consensus regarding what aspects of program quality are important and how these dimensions of program quality fit into the overall picture of afterschool programming. (Palmer, Anderson, & Sabatelli, 2009, p. 9)

Though the language and structure of the categories is nuanced, NYSAN's quality framework includes each of these domains; it is relevant to and aligned with the most current research on afterschool program quality.

Strategies for Promoting High-Impact Afterschool for All

Highlighted below are the tools, strategies, and activities that agencies and organizations have employed to support program improvements using the NYSAN quality framework.

Program Quality Self-Assessment Tool

NYSAN member organizations realized that defining quality and its component parts was but one step in making a contribution to the field. Therefore, NYSAN developed the Program Quality Self-Assessment (QSA) Tool. Use of the QSA Tool is a critical component of many programs' quality improvement strategies. The self-assessment process uses the quality framework to provide structure for afterschool professionals to reflect on their practice through dialogue and to own the process of continuously improving their programs. Unlike from many other assessment tools, the QSA Tool is designed to be used by program staff and other stakeholders, including youth, family members, and school and community partners, without an external observer. Programs may use the QSA Tool to assess their program along all ten elements of program quality at one time, or they may use parts of the QSA Tool over several weeks or even throughout the program year.

In August and September 2009, NYSAN used a web-based instrument to survey New York State afterschool providers about their use of the QSA Tool (NYSAN, 2009). Respondents included 106 program providers from all regions of the state, including large and small programs in rural, suburban, and urban communities. Users of the QSA Tool reported numerous benefits to their programs. First and foremost, the self-assessment successfully guided users through the processes of both assessing quality and creating an action plan that fosters a shared sense of ownership and accountability among program stakeholders, while also building consensus about what constitutes a high-quality program. Program providers also reported unanticipated results of use of the tool, including attracting funding and improving relationships between programs and schools. Eighty-three percent of QSA Tool users reported reaping benefits from use of the QSA Tool, and 75 percent reported one or more distinct changes in their program after using the QSA Tool for self-assessment. Moreover, 55 percent of

respondents identified quality improvements in their program as a result their self-assessment.

Loretta McCormick oversees the Creating Rural Opportunities Partnership (CROP), a consortium of sixteen rural school districts that collectively aim to provide afterschool environments that are safe and supportive; promote student achievement; foster learning through personal, social, and positive youth development opportunities; and engage parents and guardians in experiences that foster a greater connection with their school and community. McCormick said that CROP, a 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) grantee, uses the QSA Tool to identify strengths and areas in need of improvement across multiple program sites, many of which are separated by long distances. CROP uses the results to focus its biannual professional development offerings on topics identified through the self-assessment process. Having a common assessment tool allows each program to work toward the same goals and share a common vision despite geographic distance (NYSAN, 2007).

In New York City, Doreen Teh of the Child Center of New York's program at P.S. 24 asserts that the self-assessment process allows her to develop stronger partnerships and improve the sustainability of her program:

[The QSA Tool] has strengthened the communication between the afterschool program and the school; all staff members have a clear understanding of program goals and can identify real opportunities for working together. We are speaking the same language and are more focused and intentional in our practice. It has created a common framework to guide our work. (NYSAN, 2007, p. 32)

Technical Assistance

In addition to the QSA Tool itself, programs have access to the QSA Tool User's Guide, which provides practical strategies and examples from afterschool practitioners on best practices in self-assessment and program improvement. The user's guide includes information on beginning a self-assessment, engaging stakeholders in the process, and using assessment findings to create an action plan for addressing areas in need of improvement.

Moreover, NYSAN developed an online version of the user's guide, which provides direct links to dozens of resources organized around the ten elements of program

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The second edition of the NYSAN quality framework and QSA Tool is being released in 2010. For more information on using or adapting the quality framework, user's guide, or QSA Tool, please contact NYSAN at 646-943-8670 or info@nysan.org.

quality. This user's guide helps afterschool practitioners assess their programs and make feasible, effective changes to improve program quality. The user's guide booklet and website are available, free of charge, at www.nysan.org.

Additional supports include conference workshops, trainings, and program supports designed around the quality framework. Two annual statewide conferences, designed for 21st CCLC grantees but attended by a wide audience, are structured using the ten elements of program quality. Several NYSAN partner organizations, including The After-School Corporation and the Partnership for After School Education, provide program quality elements from the quality framework in their training menus. Regional afterschool networks throughout the state also use the quality framework to offer professional learning opportunities on program quality. Collectively, these supports are part of a growing consensus across the state regarding building capacity for quality programming.

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) contracts with six Regional Student Support Services Centers; each of the centers employs a regional coordinator who is trained in and has experience with the QSA Tool. The regional coordinators often facilitate programs' use of the QSA Tool or design program supports based on the results of their self-assessments. At the Hudson Valley Student Support Services Center, Regional Coordinator Tammy Rhein shapes region-wide technical assistance and professional development plans around common areas in need of improvement as recognized through local programs' self-assessment results (personal communication, July 6, 2009).

Carol Marshall, a teacher trainer with the Mid-State Student Support Services Center, facilitates conversations about quality by starting with two elements identified by a program's leaders as most relevant to the success and sustainability of their work. According to Marshall, one of the most useful purposes of the quality framework is to help programs become familiar with best practices.

Marshall noted, "I encourage them to learn and use the language when writing objectives for their activities, or for applying for grants that require a comprehensive, research-based approach to making a program successful and sustainable. The QSA Tool is an effective resource for so much more than self-assessment" (personal communication, July 6, 2009).

Statewide Institute for Public Agencies

As part of a long-term effort to build a coordinated, statewide system to support afterschool programs, NYSAN led a two-year professional development experience for the program managers of the major public funding streams for afterschool programs in which the QSA Tool was a central component.

Participating program managers represented staff from NYSED and NYS Office of Children and Family Services, as well as the New York City Departments of Education and of Youth and Community Development. The quality framework provided structure for events throughout the two-year initiative. NYSAN conducted a needs assessment and provided training and support in the areas of program quality requested most by institute participants. As a result, all of the state and city agency staff members who oversee large afterschool grants are equipped to use the quality framework and QSA Tool with the hundreds of publicly funded programs they oversee and support.

Statewide Policy Development

Approaching program quality through policy development has proved to be an effective strategy to support the development and sustainability of high-impact afterschool programs. NYSED has adopted the quality framework in two ways: requiring that agencies seeking 21st CCLC funds design their programs around the ten elements of quality and subsequently requiring grantees to use the QSA Tool twice each year. These requirements are written into the 21st CCLC request for proposals as well as other NYSED documents (NYS Education Department, 2009). In New York City, the Department of Youth and Community Development used the self-assessment tool to monitor grantees of the agency's Out-of-School Time Initiative, the largest municipally funded out-of-school time system in the nation. The agency tells programs that they will be held accountable to the QSA standards, thereby encouraging them to use the QSA Tool to design programs, maintain program quality, and fulfill agency mandates. By using these policy strategies, New York State is building a highly-effective afterschool

system based on *common* quality standards in which continuous improvement and self-assessment are linked with reporting and accountability requirements.

National Use of the QSA Tool

As a result of its relevance to a myriad of programs, New York's quality framework has been adapted in several states including Missouri, California, Ohio, and New Mexico, each of which used NYSAN's advice and experience in creating their frameworks and self-assessment tools. In some cases, states used the framework and QSA Tool and simply edited them to reflect local regulations and promising practices. For some states, the statewide afterschool network led the process, while in others the state education agency or local groups took the lead and have been successful in promoting wide adoption of their new tool. Data collected through the aforementioned survey (NYSAN, 2009) and anecdotes from across the nation suggest that the framework and the self-assessment tool are a powerful pair, providing both research-based standards and an accessible instrument to help programs meet them.

Lessons Learned

NYSAN has documented the development of the quality framework and QSA Tool to disseminate information about the process to other states and organizations. NYSAN has found that raising awareness and providing training in the use of the quality framework and the self-assessment tool are critical to promoting wide adoption of both elements. In our survey, 37 percent of respondents had never used the QSA Tool, and 40 percent reported lack of understanding as a barrier to its use in their programs. Many such respondents reported that education and training would support their programs' use of the QSA Tool (NYSAN, 2009).

NYSAN has also learned that the quality framework and QSA Tool must continuously evolve in response to new research and changes in the field. The NYSAN Quality Assurance Committee is currently revisiting all quality indicators to be sure they remain essential to program quality. Perhaps more importantly, the committee has discussed adding several indicators that either provide new concepts or address aspects of program quality more explicitly. For example, one new indicator would address a current priority for the afterschool and early childcare communities by specifically

linking afterschool and early learning programs and policies. Another planned addition will incorporate language regarding inclusion of youth of all levels of ability. Additionally, several new indicators will be added to increase alignment between the QSA Tool and other quality assessment tools, such as the Youth Program Quality Assessment (Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, 2005).

Achieving High-Impact Afterschool for All

Access to afterschool programs alone is insufficient; *quality* counts in ensuring that youth have access to supportive, effective afterschool programming. The field is recognizing this tenet more and more, as evidenced by a growing investment in quality assessment. As described by the Forum for Youth Investment (Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2009):

From a research perspective, more evaluations are including an assessment of program quality and many have incorporated setting-level measures (where the object of measurement is the program, not the participants) in their designs.... At the policy level, decision-makers are looking for ways to ensure that resources are allocated to programs likely to have an impact.... At the practice level, programs, organizations and systems are looking for tools that help concretize what effective practice looks like and allow practitioners to assess, reflect on and improve their programs. (p. 6)

The NYSAN quality framework and QSA Tool have moved programs in New York State closer to meeting quality standards and have created a stronger culture of continuous improvement in local and statewide afterschool systems.

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